Scores of "baby boxes," where mothers can anonymously and safely "post" newborns they cannot care for, have appeared in houses and hospitals across Europe in the past decade. The boxes are extremely controversial. Advocates say they save babies' lives, while the U.N. is alarmed at their rising numbers.

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Melissa Block.

In Europe, some 700 years ago, impoverished mothers would sometimes abandon infants in something called a foundling wheel. It was a kind of revolving crib or an opening, a hatch in a church wall behind which there were nuns and monks waiting to rescue the child. Well, today, the practice is back in a different form. There's been a sharp rise in the use of baby boxes where parents can anonymously abandon babies. As NPR's Philip Reeves reports, it's the subject of intense controversy.

PHILIP REEVES, BYLINE: This is a story about one of the saddest walks in the world. It's a walk of just a few yards, down some damp stone steps, past some potted geraniums to the basement of a house. The house seems like any other until you look at the door. The door has a steel hatch, a bit like a laundry shoot, though there's no mistaking its purpose. There's a sign that says...
NINA GREVE: Babyklappe, yeah.

REEVES: Which means?

GREVE: Baby hatch. Well, this is a flap, basically. We tried to find another word for it, but it's really - it's a flap. It's a hatch. So...

REEVES: Dozens of people have made this walk over the years. They were probably mothers, though we don't know that for sure. We do know they're desperate. They're desperate enough to walk down these stone steps, carrying a newborn baby to pull open the hatch, place the baby inside, close it and walk away forever. It takes just a few seconds.

GREVE: It opens easily. It's supposed to, of course.

REEVES: Tell me what's inside.

GREVE: Inside is a warming bed. And we put, like, a sleeping bag in there because most babies are, after all, naked when they get here. So the mother can just wrap them up, and it will hold until we get here.

REEVES: Nina Greve is from Project Findelbaby, an organization that operates the first baby hatch opened in Germany in modern times. The hatch has been here, in the middle of Hamburg, for 13 years. Inside it, there's a security camera - focused only on the baby's cradle and not on the person leaving it there - some teddy bears and an envelope.

GREVE: It's a letter, to the mom. It says, it's OK what you have done because you made sure that your baby's been taken care of, that she has every right to call us. She can call us here. She can go on the Internet.

REEVES: When the baby is placed on the cradle, it triggers an alarm alerting a security company. Greve reckons it takes a maximum of seven minutes for one of her team to arrive. For the mom, leaving the baby, this experience is surely hell. Greve says it's also emotional for carers on the receiving end.

GREVE: You are shaking like crazy, and the adrenalin is like pushing through the body. And as soon as you have the baby in your arms, it's really OK. And everybody wants to be part of it.
REEVES: The baby is taken to hospital for shots and a check-up. There, it's handed over to foster parents. Sometimes a mom will come back to be re-united with her baby and given shelter and support. If she doesn't show up after eight weeks, her baby is placed for adoption. Greve would prefer the world didn't need baby hatches, but she believes, unfortunately, it does.

GREVE: Because we have so many babies being found in the backyards, in trash cans, in forests where somebody buried them because they couldn't do anything with it.

REEVES: The Hamburg baby box was opened in response to a public outcry over the death of two babies found abandoned in the city. At least 11 of the 27 countries of the European Union now operate baby boxes. The number of boxes is growing, and so is the controversy surrounding them.

KEVIN BROWNE: We consider that baby boxes are dangerous because they don't uphold children's rights or parental rights, and they promote the unsafe birth of children in the community rather than with medical and health support in hospital environments.

REEVES: Kevin Browne is director of the Center of Forensic and Family Psychology at Britain's Nottingham University. He's spent years researching baby abandonment.

BROWNE: Recent times, the main drive, we think, for the use of baby boxes is where a mother is an illegal immigrant or an illegal worker, and therefore is frightened to go to a maternity unit or a hospital.

REEVES: But, says Browne, don't assume babies are always left in baby boxes by their moms.

BROWNE: It can be an outraged grandparent that has stolen the baby from the mother and putting it into baby in the baby box, or an outraged relative. It could be a sex worker or a pimp.

REEVES: Browne's findings went to the United Nation's Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is also looking into this issue. The committee agrees with him. It's concluded a child has the right to know the identity of his or her parents and that baby boxes violate this right. In this argument, though, everything depends on which right you think matters most.
LUTZ EIDAM: The first and the most important is, of course, the right to live because without this right, all the other rights that follow out of the constitution are worthless.

REEVES: Lutz Eidam is a German lawyer who's written a book about baby boxes. Germany has more boxes than anywhere else in Western Europe, but its law is vague. It's not absolutely clear they're legal. Opponents of baby boxes say there are better options like going to hospital, anonymously giving birth and handing the child to the authorities. Women, in fact, abandon babies in maternity units far more often than depositing them in baby boxes. Yet Eidam believes some women are deterred from doing this because it's too complicated and they don't trust the authorities to protect their anonymity. That, he says, is why the world needs the baby box.

EIDAM: It is my deep belief that we need it as a last way out, a very last way out, for very troublesome and complicated situations to protect the life of the baby and to pay attention to the desire of young women for help.

REEVES: Do baby boxes really save lives? Christiane Woopen of the German Ethics Council, which advises the German government, says there's no statistical evidence of this.

CHRISTIANE WOOPEN: The numbers of killed babies did not diminish. The numbers of abandoned children did not diminish. It is not right to life that is at stake here, but only probably a small, higher probability of saving a life perhaps.

REEVES: Woopen believes the baby box system is failing mothers in desperate need.

WOOPEN: I think it is especially important to have in mind that women who feel that they cannot care for their child need the help of the society, and just putting boxes somewhere where they can relinquish their child is not really helping.

REEVES: The argument is gathering momentum. Kevin Browne thinks baby boxes will eventually be consigned to history's trash can like the foundling wheel.

BROWNE: It will be, I think, over time seen as an ancient practice that is unacceptable and not really a part of the 21st century.
REEVES: But the 21st century is proving a rough ride. Governments should think very carefully, says Lutz Eidam, before they stop women making that sad, sad walk down the damp steps to the box in the door.

EIDAM: If there is a chance, if it's only a chance, to save babies' lives, I think it's worth it. Even one a year makes it worth to have a baby box.


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